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The Intersectional Madwoman Outside the Attic: Agency and Identity in Madness

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The novels Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys and Nervous Conditions by Tsitsi Dangarembga break the silence surrounding Africana women's intersectional experiences through the representation of madness that viscerally rejects the patriarchal, colonial and even literary burdens in the novels by unapologetically asserting hybridised identities.

Where madness today is considered a symptom of mental impairment or psychosis, the term has previously been attributed to individuals whose behaviours did not adhere to and threatened societal mandates. Employed as proof of the natural inferiority of certain individuals, the label of insanity has historically been a method of instating control. Indeed, it was a social act of establishing conformity and identifying deviants. With early iterations of thought taken from Aristotelian philosophy, the belief that moral character and worth of an individual is actualised in the body shaped the conditions under which people were deemed valuable to society. To borrow Judith Butler's term, historical madness was outside the realm of social acceptability and, therefore, resulted in lacking "social intelligibility", alienating individuals from the benefits and security that come from societal compliance. In particular, women and historically colonised peoples have been victims of such illegitimate categorisations.

In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter asks the question "whether mental pathology was suppressed rebellion? . . . Was hysteria—the 'daughter's disease'—a mode of protest for women deprived of other social or intellectual outlets or expressive options?" (147). This question serves as the basis of this paper. Specifically, I argue that for colonised and racialised women, already alienated from the protection of society by being doubly oppressed by gender and racial hierarchies and experiencing intersectional oppression, madness, while indisputably traumatic, offered a space for resistance. Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, describes the state of experiencing compounding and multiple oppressions on the basis of identity categories such as gender, class, sexuality, ability etc. To illustrate my argument, I turn to the literature of Africana women (that is, women of Africa and the African diaspora, including African American and Caribbean African) by female, postcolonial authors, where the representation of female madness draws attention to its function as a regulatory tool

by colonial powers and men and exposes the silence surrounding the experiences of African women, a specifically female and postcolonial experience.

I explore Jean Rhys's seminal novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)—based on Charlotte Brontë's character Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*— and *Nervous Conditions* (1988) by Tsitsi Dangarembga, which follows the search for agency by the female members of a Rhodesian family in the late 20th century. Both novels illustrate how madness offers the characters a level of liberation and agency to resist the status quo, consequently subverting historical implications of the label. I argue that the label of madness in the novels is a simplification of the complex states of the racial and cultural hybridisation the characters' experience and the consequence of suffering from an intersectional experience of compounding race and gender oppression. I look to the literature itself where both authors, women of African descent, write back to the historical and literary narratives of madness that reinforced the colonial project of the Caribbean and Africa. The depiction of madness in the novels differs from historical and literary representations of madness, whereby, in being denied identities of their own making, the characters' madness allows for a visceral rejection of patriarchal, colonial and even literary burdens in the novel, unapologetically asserting hybridised identities.

Narratives of Madness

Crenshaw's introduction of intersectionality emphasises that a refusal to acknowledge compounded discriminations results in analyses of racism and sexism being distorted, as “the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon” (Crenshaw 140). Indeed, perceiving and analysing madness from a single-axis framework both contributes to ignoring the specific and complex experiences of intersectional individuals and serves to reinforce damaging narratives of essentialism. For Rhys and Dangarembga, there can be no separating the colonial experience from the patriarchal.

For women and colonised individuals, madness and the science of madness was a double-edged sword that not only imposed cultural standards of rational behaviour but essentialised irrationality as distinctly feminine or behaviour of the supposedly uncivilised. Throughout much of the nineteenth-century, madness was considered a “female malady”. Phyllis Chesler states in *Woman and Madness* (1972) that the label of insanity was applied to those who violated gender and patriarchal norms, assigning a penalty for “being ‘female’ as

well as for desiring or daring *not* to be” (16). Similarly, Supriya Nair maintains that “Africa has long been stereotyped in the West into images of illness, madness, devastation, and hysteria” (132) to establish seemingly inherent inferiority of African and Africans from Europe and Europeans. They deemed Africans to be incapable of complex rational capabilities and predisposed to madness as a consequence of inherent animalistic tendencies.

Indeed, Foucault describes how the concept of madness functions to self-regulate society by maintaining socially acceptable behaviours under threat of confinement. He argues that “the hysterization of women, which involved a thorough medicalization of their bodies and their sex, was carried out in the name of the responsibility they owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society” (146-7). Colonialism depended on those differences to maintain superiority and an authoritative narrative to establish those hierarchies. However, while these narratives were created to invalidate the participation of women or non-white races in society, it is vital to note the very real danger of madness that arose from the oppression upon women and racialised individuals, compounded for those who experienced multiple oppression that is often overlooked.

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Frantz Fanon explicitly links the colonial experience with psychological disorders, viewing colonialism as “a systemized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, [it] forces the colonized to constantly ask the question: ‘Who am I in reality?’” (182). This desire to know one’s self is reoccurring in both novels. Fanon argues that there is an “internalization – or, better, the epidermalization” (4) of racial inferiority. Though Fanon does not consider the additional oppression of gender that the colonised female experiences, this epidermalization of inferiority is apparent in the novels as the questions of race, gender and status are at the heart of the madness in both novels. Moreover, underpinning both novels is the consequence of colonial efforts in the country intermingling with the role of culture. Helen Tiffin claims that “Post-colonial cultures are inevitably hybridised, involving a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity” (17). The colonial presence results in a mutated form of expectations that asks for both progression and civility as it is defined by the colonising party while reinforcing a hierarchy that hopes to establish the dependency on colonialism. This dependency does not only refer to material resources but also on approval and encouragement. W. E. B DuBois articulates this experience of struggling with both Western and native expectations as double consciousness:

[T]wo souls, two thoughts, two unrecognized strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. . . a peculiar sensation . . . of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (14)

This warring, tangible in the communities surrounding both Rhys and Dangarembga's characters set the foundation for an intersectional struggle.

Identities in Madness

The foundations of literary traditions in writing madness are dominated by male-centric and euro-centric narratives. The silence imposed by literary narratives of white males towards women and white colonial powers towards colonised races is also found in male-centric black fiction where the “melancholic condition of postcolonial intellectuals has been both totalised and masculinized” (Nair 131). Much like the dominance of European female narratives in the literary tradition of madness, this narrative ignores the struggle of Black women in favour of the colonised male, where the “homogenization of pathological African bodies obscured the specificities of gender- and class-informed diseases” (Nair 132). As noted by Nair, the voice of “the colonized female is largely absent” (132).

Rhys and Dangarembga, in writing back to this tradition, attempt to draw attention to the silence surrounding the experiences of Africana women. For Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, part of her madness is formed by the double consciousness rooted in the conditions of her birth, which isolates her from any form of community. In contrast, in *Nervous Conditions*, the sense of double consciousness is entrenched in the character of Babamakuru, the family patriarch. Dangarembga subverts the narrative of specifically male post-colonial narrative, demonstrating instead how the consequence of the expectations of masculinity is felt by women.

Both novels demonstrate how the structure implemented by a colonial presence has served to divide the societies in which they live, placing both community and individual members into states of double consciousness. Moreover, the novels demonstrate how intersectional individuals are at increased risk; their hybridised identities and compounded oppression relegates them to being community-less.

Bertha Mason is most famously known as “the madwoman in the attic” from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, the beast-like first wife of Mr Rochester. *Wide Sargasso Sea* gives an origin story to the mysterious character, chronicling the life of Antoinette Cosway in three parts, focusing on her childhood, the beginning period of her marriage to the unnamed Mr Rochester and the end of her time in the attic at Thornfield Hall where she is trapped and called Bertha. Underlying the tale is Antoinette’s, and to some extent Rhys’s, anxiety, of distancing the character from the label of madness. Writing directly to Brontë’s depiction of Bertha Mason, Rhys tells Antoinette’s story to highlight the fact that while European women wrote about madness to voice their resistance to the oppression of women, issues of race were often neglected in their depictions of oppression and understanding of madness. In challenging the historical narratives of madness, Rhys must create a story for Bertha that is convincing enough to detach from the fate Brontë assigns Antoinette. As a result, both author and character must contend with the question of who Antoinette is and where she belongs outside of her inevitable madness that has already been written.

The novel delves heavily into the notion of belonging, where Antoinette, a Creole woman, is separated, both physically and metaphorically, from her black, Jamaican neighbours. The question of why she was “ever born at all” (64) is a common refrain recalling Fanon’s question “Who am I in reality?” (182). When Amélie, Antoinette’s maid, sings of the white cockroach, Antoinette explains the connection between her and the cockroach to her husband:

That’s me. That’s what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I’ve heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. (64)

She is unable to claim Jamaican colonial history as her own as her heritage dates to the Spanish colonisers. She is also denied connection to a European heritage as the conditions of her birth of having a non-European mother render her ineligible to be a part of the Western colonial populations. Christophine, the Jamaican maid who resides in Antoinette’s family house, recognises the tension in being Creole, telling Rochester that “[Antoinette] is not *béké* [white person] like you, but she is *béké*, and not like us either” (100). For Christophine, Antoinette’s identity is defined by being neither white enough nor black enough. Antoinette struggles to resolve the tension as she finds herself inherently hybridised and vulnerable, as she lacks community. Moreover, as a woman, Antoinette finds herself in a position of even more

vulnerability, where the lack of community to support her puts her in jeopardy. Gilbert and Gubar articulate how Rochester “married Bertha Mason for status, for sex, for money, for everything but love and equality” (355-56), emphasising the lack of protection Antoinette faces. Rhys writes it as avarice and greed, as Christophine observes that “money have pretty face for everybody, but for [Rochester] money pretty like pretty self, he can’t see nothing else” (72). She explicitly connects Rochester’s marriage to Antoinette to her condition as a woman, emphasising the economic and social limitations of women.

The victim of madness in Dangarembga’s novel, *Nyasha*, is a young Rhodesian girl returning to Africa after spending the majority of her childhood in England. She faces the problem of being unable to reconcile whom she has become under western tutelage that with the patriarchal and colonial expectations placed on her upon her return to Rhodesia. Her story is told through the eyes of her cousin, Tambu, who having grown up Rhodesia perceives Nyasha as a recipient of privilege denied to Tambu. However, though she holds the supposed advantages of Western education, she is nonetheless a victim of the double consciousness that plagues Babamukuru, her father. Like Rhys, Dangarembga writes back to the male, black intellectual experience of colonial education, recognising how expectations of western colonialism on his race and the patriarchal structure of his culture entwine Babamukuru. Fanon’s claim that “Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro” (8), is evidenced in Babamukuru, whose approval from the colonial authorities relies on their belief that “Babamukuru was a good African. And it was generally believed that good Africans bred good African children who also thought about nothing except serving their communities” (109). Babamukuru views himself as an outlier in his country, having demonstrated to the colonial authorities how the “good African” can achieve success and equality with his colonisers. However, he is aware that his success rests on the approval of his colonisers and the consequences of his fear of losing what he has built falls on the women in his family.

Returning to Rhodesia anglicised and confused, Nyasha feels displaced, even in her school life where “they do not like [her] language, [her] English because it is authentic and [her] Shona because it is not” (200). Nyasha “would like to belong” (200) but recognises that she does not, stating “I’m not one of them but I’m not one of you” (205). She, like Antoinette, finds herself being neither Rhodesian nor English enough, instead having an inherently hybridised identity and, consequently, being at risk of lacking community.

Resistance in Madness

My argument is not that a hybridised identity on its own brings about a state of madness. Rather, as the two novels in this paper illustrate, it is the consequence of the epistemological erasure of the identity and the consequential resistance to the erasure that results in madness. *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *The Bell Jar*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Jane Eyre* are some of the most cited works by female writers portraying their understanding of madness.¹ Female authors often used the theme of madness to symbolise their defiance to patriarchy in their literature. Madness, as Hélèn Cixous argues, “has been the historical label applied to female protest and revolution” (Showalter 5). In their seminal work, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point to the madwoman as a device whereby “the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts” (85). However, the unconscious ethnocentrism in many texts about female madness does not fully exemplify what madness in postcolonial women represented to postcolonial female authors. Robin Downie argues that “a changing cultural context can affect a person’s grasp of her identity, and how loss of identity can be a factor in the creation of one kind of madness” (51). Rhys and Dangarembga, as postcolonial female authors, continue the tradition of madness as a theme specifically for Africana women.

Antoinette is constantly fighting to retain an identity separate from the ones prescribed to her. Her madness is one of compounded resistance and isolation. Rochester views Antoinette as he wishes her to be, from immediately accepting the rumour that Antoinette is a “victim of diseased maternal heredity” (Showalter 67) to calling her Bertha. Rochester, whose narrative dominates almost the entirety of Part Two of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, brings with him to Jamaica a colonial bias of racial and gender stereotypes. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha’s madness is “is also linked to female sexuality” and the “‘moral insanity’ associated with women’s sexual desires” (Showalter 67). In a brief passage in Part Two, narrated by Antoinette’s otherwise absent voice, Antoinette asks Christophine to help make Rochester love her, turning to magic inherent in Caribbean culture out of desperation. Consequently, Rochester associates a fiendish sexuality with Antoinette, failing to see in it a desperate attempt to gain his love and affection. He assumes a common racial and gender stereotype of uncontrollable sexuality, not because of the evidence before him but rather to validate his preconceived biases and beliefs. Moreover, the magic fails her, just as Christophine said it would, having warned her, “that is not for *béké*”

¹ See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Phyllis Chesler, Elaine Showalter, Hélèn Cixous

(71) and, unfortunately, not for Antoinette either. Antoinette is left without resources, fighting alone to retain a humanising identity that Rochester attempts to take away from her by renaming her Bertha.

Antoinette accuses Rochester of “trying to make [her] into someone else, calling [her] by another name” (94) recognising the importance of names, and that by continuously being called Bertha, her identity as Antoinette is “drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass” (117). She is no longer Antoinette, nor is she Bertha. She assumes a liminal identity, yet unable to assert it just as she was unable to separate herself from the expectations of being Creole. The strength of Rochester’s biased narratives overpowers Antoinette’s struggle to assert her identity and her voice to both Rochester and those who see her as someone other than just Antoinette.

Nyasha’s madness, in contrast, arises from a western education that makes it impossible for her to accept the female condition in Rhodesia. The education she received contributes to her understanding of the colonial conditions that remain in post-independence Rhodesia as well as the strict patriarchal traditions that expect her to fulfil a specific role as a woman. Nyasha sees it in her mother, Maiguru, “who was not poor and had not been crushed by the weight of womanhood” (16) and yet is not exempt from the struggles of being a woman. Her struggles arise from being an *educated* woman in a culture that does not see the purpose of educated women. The outcome of Maiguru’s education is having to “choose between self and security” (103). Though educated, she is obligated to continue participating in expected gender roles and sacrifice her potential for the sake of material security.

Nyasha’s crime is not that she is aware of the oppression but that she dares bring attention to it. Like her mother, she is expected to be educated, yet she is still supposed to think like a Rhodesian woman, just like her mother. Babamukuru recognises the danger Nyasha poses, viewing her defiance to his authority as evidence that “there’s something wrong with her, something very wrong” (85). Nyasha threatens the life Babamukuru has built. In other words, Nyasha threatens the tenuous complicity between colonial education, racial conditions and patriarchal traditions in Rhodesia that Babamukuru depends on. Indeed, Babamukuru is technically correct. According to the traditions of patriarchal Rhodesia, Nyasha actions are criminal. Her resistance, specifically her violent response to Babamukuru’s authority, is a direct consequence of defying her female condition. Witnessing the internal household struggles, her

cousin Tambu, who has come to stay with them, recognises that “all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness” (118).

Nyasha internalises her father’s anger and disappointment at her inability to adapt to her culture, pardoning his verbal abuses by stating “it’s not his fault, it’s me”, and questions why she cannot “just take it like everybody else does” (193). Central to her pardon of his behaviour is an understanding of the intersectional burden Babamukuru also carries. Attempting to resist the same fate for herself, Nyasha risks her own place in society. In a rage, Babamukuru calls Nyasha a whore, condemning Nyasha outside the realms of acceptable societal behaviour, just as the label of madness does. His anger arises from the fear of losing what he has gained as a postcolonial black man who is “[u]prooted, pursued, baffled, doomed to watch the dissolution of the truths that he has worked out for himself on after another, he has to give up projecting onto the world an antinomy that coexists with him” (Fanon 2). It is the same antinomy, a parody of the situation, that exists in Nyasha, and one that she struggles to give up. She is a woman, black and educated. Worst of all, she believes in equality. The reality of her situation does not allow for her idealised egalitarianism. For a postcolonial black man to retain a sense of humanity in the eyes of the white men, the consequences are transmitted to women. Nyasha must slowly watch as her beliefs crumble. Nyasha’s hybrid identity “offends [her parents] – [she] offends them” (79) by being herself. Unable to be anyone else, Nyasha’s fate is inevitable.

Intersectional Madness

What makes Antoinette and Nyasha’s identities significant, specifically their identities of madness, is that their madness allows them to retain an identity of their own creation. Their concluding identities are not caused by their madness, nor are their identities defined by their madness, but instead should be considered as the resultant of behaviours that divert from normative social expectations. Their madness offers them a modicum of agency within the consequence of their oppression. While Antoinette and Nyasha both face tragic endings of confinement and potential death, they are successful in the purpose of their madness. That is, asserting their hybridised identities as legitimate and breaking the silence surrounding Africana women’s experiences.

Antoinette’s madness, like Nyasha’s, is a form of a hybrid identity. She is simultaneously both mad and sane. Those who think of her as unintelligible to society unfairly

label her mad while the real madness occurs from the realisation of the truth of her situation. Foucault states that “[m]adness deals not so much with truth and the world, as with man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive” (27). Antoinette’s emotional distress and mental decline at being erased are real. However, following a premonition of the fateful Thornfield Hall fire, she comes to a conclusion that has eluded her for her whole life: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (124). There is a metafictional element in the acknowledgment that fits with Gayatri Spivak’s analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*; it is a final act of lucidity that leads Antoinette to “act out the transformation of her ‘self’ into that fictive other [Brontë’s Bertha], set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction” (Spivak 251). The hybridity Antoinette struggles against is not only that of being Creole but that of being rewritten from the classic, of being Rhys’s Antoinette and Brontë’s Bertha simultaneously. The final section of the novel consciously references the literary traditions that have similarly erased the intersectional experiences of postcolonial women.

Antoinette’s character and her subsequent madness is inherently an act of resistance and agency. She is, at the very least, “not sacrificed as an insane animal for [Jane’s] consolidation” (Spivak 251). Where Rochester “transformed Antoinette from a speaking subject into an object, an other, a locked-away madwoman—a lie” (Mezei 195), Rhys’s Antoinette demonstrates agency by recognising the importance of her role as the madwoman in the attic for feminist literary history. Shoshana Felman argues that “every reading . . . is a kind of madness since it is based on illusion and induces us to identify with imaginary heroes” (64). It is this kind of madness that Antoinette not only adheres to but allows to exist in the reader. In direct contrast to Jane’s belief that “[Bertha] cannot help being mad” (Brontë Ch. 27), Rhys contends that the madness was avoidable, caused only by the historical situation Antoinette was born into. In choosing to fulfil her classic role, Antoinette demonstrates a superior mental capability than Rochester or Jane were willing to offer her. Though it does not save her, Antoinette’s madness allows for resistance, acknowledging the sacrificial role she plays for Jane and for Western female liberation, transforming her from a sacrifice to a martyr.

Similarly, Nyasha’s madness begins with an acknowledgment of truth. She too is considered mad by those around her because of her desire to stand against tradition, a desire that “spoke of alternative and possibilities that if considered too deeply would wreak havoc” (76). Nyasha torments herself with violent images, indulging in a level of madness to attain knowledge that will be the solution to the limitations of colonised and female lives. Foucault

suggests that there is an element of truth in madness that is unattainable by the sane. He argues that “madness fascinates because it is knowledge. It is knowledge, first, because all these absurd figures are in reality elements of a difficult, hermetic, esoteric learning” (21). Nyasha believes that education has the answers she is looking for, reading about “Arabs on the east coast and the British on the west; about Nazis and Japanese and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She had nightmares about these things, the atrocities; but she carried on reading all the same, because, she said, you had to know the facts if you were every going to find the solutions” (95). As Nyasha’s descent into madness reaches its climax, she recognises the falsehood of colonial education, “shredding her history book between her teeth. (‘Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies.’)” (205). Foucault states that “if madness is the truth of knowledge, it is because knowledge is absurd . . . learning becomes the madness through the very excess of false learning” (25). Nyasha falls into the trap of trusting the colonial propaganda, eventually realising that her race is entwined with her gendered oppression. Nyasha’s madness is a result of finally recognising the absurd truth of her education: knowledge will not eliminate the patriarchal culture, nor will it close the racial divide between white and black in Rhodesia.

At the climax of her madness, she tells Tambu “I don’t want to do it, Tambu, really I don’t but it’s coming, I feel it coming” (204). Though not explicitly stated what Nyasha means by this, her expression of defeat suggests suicide. In her anger at the colonial system that “put [Babamukuru] through it all” (204) and has “trapped [them]” (205), she decides once and for all that she is “not a good girl” (reminiscent of Babamukuru’s status as a “good African”) and that she “won’t grovel, [she] won’t die” (205). Coming to terms with the absurd truth of her reality leaves her with only two options: submission (like her parents) to both gender and colonial expectations of her, or death of her identity and herself if she fails to submit. Nyasha ultimately chooses neither, letting her madness take over so that she can hold onto both her resistance and identity. While it is a tragic choice and results in confinement, Nyasha chooses madness as a compromise where she can be herself and she can go “somewhere where people won’t mind” (205). Unlike Antoinette, Nyasha does not get to be a martyr, but her efforts do not go in vain. She is not silenced as her resistance inspires Tambu’s awareness of injustices and develops her own, potentially more successful, bid for liberation.

Conclusion

The diverging portrayals of madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Nervous Conditions* demonstrate the different reactions to the dual oppressions of race and gender, while simultaneously criticising the reductive, and totalising literary tradition of writing about madness, which excluded experiences of African and Caribbean women. Antoinette and Nyasha's experiences at the hands of colonialism are compounded by their simultaneous victimisation as a result of the patriarchal culture embedded in Rhodesia and Jamaica. For both women, the choice is not whether to be mad or not, as such a choice is not possible. The choice they make is whether or not to give up their identities. The dual oppression they face works to invalidate their identities and the way in which they view the world and its politics. As such, madness, though excluding them from society, allows Antoinette and Nyasha to retain their identities and assert their resistance openly, working towards legitimising their life and experiences, combatting the historical and literary absence of intersectional madness.

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Scheherazade Khan is in her third year of her PhD in literature at the University of Edinburgh. Her research aims to develop an intersectional framework for literary analysis through an examination of social history and contemporary English literature by historically oppressed peoples.